

**'It's time to bring the troops home'**

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Opinion is a powerful tool in the world of politics. Easily distorted, difficult to quantify and tricky to challenge, impressions can be used for good or for ill. Even when facts fly in the face of opinion, firmly held beliefs can still wield enormous influence.

Such is the situation we find ourselves in with the war in Iraq. As we near the end of the 54th month of occupation, opponents to this conflict have piled up enormous amounts of evidence to its harmful effects and bleak outlook. Yet the opinion of the Bush administration is that all we need to succeed is more time.

More than 3,750 of our uniformed men and women have been killed and more than \$500 billion has been squandered. This year the rate of U.S. casualties has increased enormously; every month this year saw more soldiers killed than the same month last year. By no definition can we call that progress.

By all accounts, America's influence in the world has been greatly diminished by the continued occupation, and our own security has been compromised as a result. The horrendous affects of war have ravaged Iraq, placing the country at risk of an even larger civil conflict.

If this is the administration's idea of success, one can only imagine what failure must look like.

Soon the president will again approach Congress for more money to continue this ill-conceived adventure. He is expected to request an additional \$50 billion to do more of the same in Iraq. And yet we still have no hint of a plan for departure.

Support for the war is crumbling, and will continue to as reports of failure roll in.

The nonpartisan Government Accountability Office recently reported that the Iraqi government has not achieved political reconciliation. Moreover, they have made painfully little progress toward lasting peace. The report illustrated that the Iraqi government failed to meet 15 of the 18 benchmarks it established to measure its own progress. The administration downplayed this report because they could not refute the findings.

More recently, Congress has heard more of the same from General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker: mixed progress. After more than four years of war, micro-progress in limited areas observed through a narrow viewfinder is no longer tolerable. Congress demanded real progress in Iraq, and that has not occurred.

Worse yet the administration has threatened to intensify the war. In their attempts to control the civil war, the United States is helping arm one side against the other. Often, weapons are being provided to the very insurgents who were recently preying on American soldiers.

When large numbers of American soldiers flood an Iraqi neighborhood, violence decreases. But when they leave, chaos returns. The only way to interpret that situation as “successful” is if American troops are planning to permanently garrison the country.

The administration appears to be wagering long-term stability for small, short-term gains. This patchwork approach to securing Iraq has been in effect for far too long. There is still a lack of focus on regional diplomacy and no sign of a legitimate exit strategy.

The administration does not appear to have the vision or the political courage to end this debacle. It therefore will fall to Congress to pressure the president for a responsible redeployment.

It's time to expose this war for what it really is: a lingering failure that has killed thousands and cost billions. It's time for the administration to remove its blinders, set aside its opinion and recognize the reality that it's time to bring our soldiers home.

